

Guidelines for Leading Worship at Crossroads

December 5, 2011

I. GUIDELINES FOR LEADING WORSHIP

Here are some guidelines for all who lead corporate worship during the opening parts of the liturgy at Crossroads. If you have any questions about anything related to leading worship, please contact Mike Farley at 314-890-0942 or mifarley@sbcglobal.net

1. Preparation

First read carefully the excerpts from our Liturgy Literacy series attached at the conclusion of these guidelines so that you understand the theological meaning and movement of the first part of the service. (If you are a seminary student, wherever you read something about the pastor you can mentally substitute “pastors-in-training” since you are assuming the liturgical role of the pastor during this portion of the worship service.)

- *Greeting*: You should give a short welcome to everyone when you go to the pulpit. Do this loudly and confidently so that people know that the service is about to begin. Alert people to the information about childcare (which is printed on the front flap of the bulletin) and make sure to stress that children are most welcome to remain in the whole service. If there is a musical prelude to follow, you may conclude your welcome by inviting the people to prepare themselves for worship and then simply sit down in one of the chairs behind the pulpit.
- *Introduction to the service*: If you wish, you may include a brief introduction and orientation to the liturgy. You might offer some brief explanation, illustration, or quote that highlights the reasons we gather for worship and/or explains some aspect of the service. You might offer some brief comments about the way that corporate worship concretely embodies some theme(s) from the reading(s), sermon, and songs for that day. Feel free to be creative here.
- *Possible prelude*: Often the music team will want to play and/or sing something for a prelude. (We often introduce new songs as a prelude so that the congregation can hear the melody before they sing it later in the service.) This prelude will come after your initial welcome but prior to the call to worship. Make sure you consult with the music team leader no later than 10:25 am to find out about their plans for a prelude (and about any other musical issues in the service).
- *Posture*: Just before the call to worship, invite the congregation to stand with a simple direction. Say something like: “Please stand as God calls us into his special presence for worship.”

2. Formal Greeting and Call to Worship

- *Authoritative, energetic leadership*: The formal greeting at the beginning of the liturgy helps us acknowledge the greatness and glory of God and of what we receive from him in worship. The call to worship is an authoritative summons from God himself that calls his people into a

special audience with him for corporate worship. Both of these aspects of the beginning of worship call for an authoritative and joyful manner of leading. Speak loudly and with great energy and joy. Practice enough so that you will not stumble over the words and so that you can make eye contact with the congregation (rather than having your eyes glued to the page). Making eye contact enhances the personal nature of this act (God is personally calling his people to be with him!). If there are dialogue parts for the congregation, remember to wait for their response.

- *Seamless transition to opening/entrance hymn*: Please do not say anything to introduce the opening/entrance song that immediately follows the call to worship. The title (and, at the Maplewood site, the text) is already printed in the bulletin, so you do not have to tell people what is coming; they can read it for themselves. Refraining from introductory comments also allows the church to continue communion with God uninterrupted. In the call to worship, God summons his people to a special audience with him for worship, and the logical next step is the congregation's response to God's summons.

3. Prayer for God to Help Us Worship

- *Seamless transition*: This prayer should immediately follow the conclusion of the singing with no introduction. The prayer at this point is a prayer that sums up and concludes all of our opening prayers (remember, the songs are prayers also), so there should be no interruption of the sequence of prayer with additional greetings or other kinds of statements. Do NOT say "Good morning" or "Let us pray" (we're already praying in the songs) or give any kind of explanatory introduction to your prayer. Rather, when the singing concludes move immediately into your prayer.

- *Content*: This prayer is not written for you, so you will need to prepare this prayer. This is another point for you to exercise some creativity in leading worship. It usually a good idea to begin the prayer with some brief initial statements of praise for God that pick up the theme of the preceding songs and/or the call to worship. (The bulletin is emailed to everyone on in the church email on Friday afternoons, so you should look at these ahead of time to prepare.) The focus of the prayer, however, is a request that God be with us throughout the service by his Spirit to help us corporately respond to his call to worship with faith, love, and hope, engaging all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength to receive God and his gifts in the service and respond appropriately to all that God offers us and does for us (whether with repentance, faith, praise, thanks, intercession, offerings, rejoicing, etc.).

- *Length*: Do not make this prayer very long. There is not necessarily a direct relationship between the length of a prayer and its quality. Aim for about 3-5 sentences.

- *Tone*: This prayer comes at the end of a period of energetic praise in the opening hymns. So be confident, passionate, and enthusiastic in order to maintain the spirit of that prayer. (You should practice this prayer out loud so that you will not stumble over words and sound tentative.) Ideally, you are focusing on the Lord himself and the energy that flows from that realization should affect the manner of your prayer.

- *Corporate Amen:* Invite the congregation to conclude the prayer with you in a corporate Amen. You will need to signal the congregation by concluding your prayer in such a way that everyone knows when to respond. Say something like this:

“We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ,
together as God’s people saying,
[slight pause]
Amen!”

- *Sitting:* Direct the congregation to sit after the final Amen. You can do this by saying, “Please be seated” or “You may be seated.”

4. Call to confession

- *Introduction:* This is yet another place for you to exercise some personal creativity in leading worship. You *may* introduce the time of confession of sins with a brief word of explanation about the purpose of confessing our sins in the service. It is helpful to connect this brief transition/introduction to the broader themes of the reading(s) and sermon for that day. If you do offer some words of explanation/introduction, try to keep it sufficiently brief so that it actually functions as a transition in the service rather than a break in the service (try aiming for 1–3 sentences). However, it is also perfectly fine to let the liturgy speak for itself by moving directly into the Scripture text for the confession of sins. If you wish, you may say something as simple as: “The Lord calls us to confess our sins to him with these words from...” and then move directly into the text for the call to confession.
- *Silent prayer:* After reading of the Scriptural text for the call to confession, very briefly remind everyone that after the corporate prayer of confession there will be a time of silence for private prayers of confession to confess our persons sins to God.

5. Confession of Sin

- *Beginning together:* So that the congregation knows when to begin, open the prayer with “Let us pray.”
- *Pace & tone:* This is a prayer of humility, so pray in that tone. You must speak loudly and confidently enough, however, that the congregation knows when to begin (you are there to lead, after all). Because you are miked, your praying will be heard by everyone and thus your praying helps set the pace everyone. Remember that congregations praying together with one voice move more slowly through the text than one person praying. Practice this prayer at home so that you do not stumble over words and can pray the prayer at a measured pace that the congregation can follow comfortably.
- *Silent prayer:* After the corporate prayer is done, allow the congregation to pray in silence. Allow at least 60 seconds for this silent prayer. That might seem like a very long time when you are standing in the pulpit, but it is not very long when you are sitting in the pew trying to collect your thoughts and pray.

6. Declaration of forgiveness

- *Standing*: Ask the congregation to stand before the declaration of forgiveness. Say something like, “Please stand to receive God’s word of forgiveness,” and allow the congregation a moment to rise before continuing.
- *Announcing God’s forgiveness*: The declaration of forgiveness is just that: a declaration, not a prayer. It is God’s word of response to the prayers of confession that we just finished praying. The liturgy is a personal encounter between God and his people, and so the congregation needs to hear God’s direct, personal response to their confession. The main point is for the congregation to hear God say through your words: “Your sins are forgiven.”
- *Connecting & Tone*: Try to maintain eye contact with the congregation as much as possible when you announce God’s forgiveness of their sins. God is speaking his personal word to his people through you, and your eye contact signals a greater personal connection. This is a supremely joyful announcement, so smile and relish the privilege you have to be a minister of God’s grace by declaring their forgiveness with joyful confidence.
- *Sursum corda* (Maplewood site only): At the Maplewood site, the liturgy moves directly from the declaration of God’s forgiveness to this ancient dialogue drawn from some of the earliest liturgies in the history of Christian worship:

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

Almighty Father, together with the angels, and all the company of heaven, and the whole church on earth, we praise your glorious name.

This dialogue marks the transition from confession and forgiveness to the time of praise and thanks that we enter as a response to God’s forgiveness. (See the Liturgy Literacy questions below for explanation of the theological meaning and function of this dialogue.) Your tone should model a proper response to the grace of God: exuberant joy! Thus, you should lead this dialogue with sufficient volume and confidence to communicate joy. You might also consider raising your hands as a motion that mirrors and expresses the movement of our hearts (“Lift up your hearts...”).

- *Seamless transition to the songs that follow*: Please do not say anything to introduce the songs that immediately follow God’s declaration of forgiveness. As with the opening hymn, the words and titles are printed in the bulletin, so you don’t need to announce them. Refraining from introductory comments also allows the church to continue communion with God uninterrupted. The musicians will be ready to begin leading the congregation’s response in God immediately when you are done with the words of forgiveness.

II. LITURGY LITERACY

Call to Worship

Q: Why do we have a call to worship at the beginning of the service in which “God Calls Us to Worship”?

A: When the church gathers for corporate worship, we do not call God to come to be with us. Rather, we gather because God summons us to come to him so that he can renew his covenant relationship with us (e.g. Lev 9:1-6; Ps 95:1-3; 98:1-4; 100:1-4). God’s initiative in the liturgy reflects the consistent pattern of God’s actions in history: God always takes the initiative to pursue sinful and broken people and to save us by establishing and renewing his covenant relationship with us. Therefore, the first major action in the liturgy is God’s call for us to come and to respond to the uniquely powerful and clear way that God reveals himself to us and gives himself to us in the liturgy which is what we mean by experiencing God’s “special presence.” When we hear the call to worship, we ought to be attentive and respond with faith, love, and joy because it is God himself who summons us to come to receive him and his gifts of grace.

Opening/Entrance Hymn

Q: Why do we sing songs following the call to worship as we enter God’s special presence in response to his summons?

A: In the Old Testament, when God’s people gathered at the temple to draw near to God in corporate worship, they entered into God’s special presence with singing. For example, Psalms 120–134 were psalms of “ascent,” which the people sang as they went up to worship God on Mount Zion, the mountain where the temple stood (see also Ps 95:1–2, and Isa 35:10). It is fitting that Christians continue to enter his presence with vigorous songs of praise and thanksgiving (Ps 100:2, 4) because the Christian church is now God’s temple, the place where God’s special presence, grace, and glory are revealed and experienced by His people (see e.g., 1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:5; see also Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16 for commands to sing together). The opening songs/hymns are usually general hymns of praise and thanksgiving that focus upon God’s greatness, beauty, and glory of his character as revealed in his mighty works of creating the world and delivering the world from sin and death. Our songs are God-centered in this way because his works of creation and salvation are the foundation of the church’s covenant relationship with him and thus the very reason that we gather for corporate worship.

Prayer of Invocation

Q: After the opening songs of praise and thanksgiving, why do we pray for God to help us worship?

A: In this prayer, we are not calling upon God to be present with us because he has already called us. Rather, this prayer acknowledges that we can only respond to God from the depths of our heart and soul if he is present within and among us to give us the desire and the power to do so. Therefore, it is fitting at the beginning of the worship service to ask the Lord to give us the

ability to respond to him by the supernatural power of his Holy Spirit with faith, hope, and love and with all our mind and strength (John 14–17; Rom 8:1–11; Gal 5:16–26; 1 Cor 2:1–16; Eph 1:13–21). When we realize the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us to worship God as we were created to do, we understand that in corporate worship we participate in the very life and communion of the Trinity: we worship God the Father only through God the Son (Jesus) by the power of God the Holy Spirit in us, who brings us into a living union and relationship with Christ our High Priest as he leads us in worship before the heavenly throne of God (Heb 4:14–16; 7:1–10:25).

Call to confession

Q: Why does God call us to confess our sins?

A: Since God’s primary purpose in the worship service is to renew his covenant relationship with the church, it makes sense that the main part of the service begins by clearing away the barriers to relationship created by our sins. When the pastor or other worship leader calls us to confess our sins, it is God who is taking the initiative to pursue us with grace and to deal with the obstacles of guilt, alienation, and shame, which inhibit us from knowing and responding to God. He wants to forgive us, and he knows that we need assurance of his love and willingness to forgive in order to come to him freely with our confession. Therefore, the biblical texts through which God invites us to confession (e.g., 1 John 1:8–9; Ps 51:17; Isa 55:6–7; Prov 28:13) not only command us to confess our sins and repent but also promise God’s forgiveness to all who acknowledge their sins and turn away from them to seek God’s mercy.

Corporate confession of sins

Q: Why do we confess our sins together, and how does confessing our sins result in God’s cleansing?

A: Whenever God renews his special relationship with his people (his covenant), he begins by restoring them to a state of favor with him by forgiving their sins. In the Old Testament, when God renewed his covenant with Israel in worship at the temple, the main part of the service began with a purification or sin offering, a sacrifice that was both a confession of sin and also a cleansing and purification of sin by the death of animals that represented the worshippers (Lev 9; 2 Chron 29). This practice taught that the way to be restored to right relationship with God was through the sacrifice of a substitute who receives the penalty of sin’s guilt in our place. This practice is fulfilled in the death of Jesus on the cross, which was the ultimate and final sin offering (Rom 8:3) to cleanse us from sin (1 Pet 2:24). Since the church is God’s new temple (Eph 2:20–22; 1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16) and since Jesus is both our sacrifice and our new high priest leading us in worship, we still follow the pattern established in the Old Testament but in a new way: we begin the main part of the service by confessing our sins to God in order to receive anew his forgiveness on the basis of Christ’s atoning death for us (1 John 1:7–9).

Q: How do we confess our sins?

A: Following the examples in Scripture (e.g., Ps 32; 51; 130; Ezra 9–10; Neh 9), we confess our sins together in unison as an expression of our unity as one people before God. Because our

confessions are public and corporate prayers, they address more general types/categories of sins common to us all (more specific, individual sins are confessed silently). These categories often relate directly to the particular themes of the Scripture reading(s) and sermon for that day. The prayers also encompass all aspects of our sinfulness by mentioning both specific sinful actions and the deeper brokenness and distortion of our motives and character that result from the corruption of original sin. This is followed by an appeal for forgiveness and new ability to love and obey the Lord by the Spirit's power. In order to express humility, we lower ourselves by sitting to pray.

Declaration of God's forgiveness

Q: Why does God's declaration of forgiveness follow our confession of sins?

A: God promises to forgive the sins of all who turn away from their sins (repent) and confess them to God seeking his mercy (e.g. Ps 32:5; 103:8, 10–12; 130:1–4; 1 John 1:8–9). Therefore, after our confession, the worship leader now speaks to declare God's forgiveness of sins to all who repent and trust in Christ (Matt 16:17–20; 18:18; John 20:22–23). We change our posture at this point from sitting in humility before God to standing and looking up to receive the Lord's merciful answer to our prayer with confident hope. This shift in posture helps us recognize that the worship leader's declaration is not the conclusion of our prayer of confession to God but rather God's own response to our confession in which he grants us fresh forgiveness and cleansing and raises us up to join in the worship of all heaven and earth before his throne with a clear conscience (Heb 4:14–16; 10:19–23; 12:18–29; Rev 4–5).

Sursum corda dialogue [Maplewood site only]

Q: What is the meaning of the dialogue that comes after the declaration of forgiveness: “Lift up your hearts/We lift them up to the Lord/Let us give thanks.../It is right to give him thanks and praise”?

A: This dialogue is called the *Sursum corda*, which is a Latin phrase that means “Lift up your hearts.” It is an ancient (3rd century) formula used to focus the attention of the congregation upon the worship of heaven and our “ascent” to join in that worship of angels and the church in heaven. This dynamic connection between the worship of heaven and earth is an important reality that takes place in our liturgy. In the Old Testament, the pattern for the Tabernacle and Temple was revealed to Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai (Exod 25:9), and these earthly structures (lavishly decorated with gold, silver, and jewels and with various forms of angels) were a copy and shadow of a heavenly reality (Heb 8:5). When Jesus ascended into heaven, he entered the heavenly tabernacle/temple where he now appears before the Father on our behalf and leads us in worship (Heb 8–9; cf. Isa 6; Rev. 4–5). This heavenly tabernacle/temple is the true “location” that we enter when we participate in corporate worship in the power of the Holy Spirit (Heb 10:19–22; 12:18–29; cf. Ps 11:4).

Q: After the *Sursum corda* dialogue (“Lift up your hearts...”) why do we give thanks and praise “together with the angels, and all the company of heaven, and the whole church on earth”?

A: The prayer that begins “Almighty Father...” connects to the end of the previous dialogue and interprets its meaning by emphasizing our access to the Father in heaven through Jesus Christ,

and calling us to join in the worship of all heaven and earth. Most of the very words of this prayer are very ancient and widespread in Christian liturgies, and thus it connects us to the worship of the one catholic church throughout history.

Q: Why do we put the *Sursum corda* at this particular point in the service?

A: It is most appropriate to emphasize our “ascent” to heaven with the *Sursum corda* dialogue following confession and forgiveness. In the Old Testament, the pattern of corporate worship that began with a purification or sin offering for confession and forgiveness of sins continued with an ascension or burnt offering that accomplished our “ascent” to God’s heavenly presence (Lev 8–9). This pattern is fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead and ascended to heaven after he had offered himself in death as a sacrifice for our sins. And it is fulfilled in our worship, for Christ’s sacrifice (and the forgiveness we receive on the basis of his death) gives us access to this heavenly worship. By forgiving our sins, God makes us ready to take our place in worship around his heavenly throne in order to hear his word, to offer ourselves afresh for his service, to pray for the world, and to celebrate the feast at his table.

Songs of praise and thanks for God’s forgiveness and our heavenly audience with him in Christ

Q: After receiving God’s forgiveness, why do we sing songs of praise and thanks?

A: Since this part of the service immediately follows the cleansing work of God that we have received through confession of sin and his forgiveness, we sing songs at this point in the service that offer praise and thanks to God for the grace and mercy that we receive in Christ on the basis of his death and resurrection for us. We also sing songs at this point in the service that focus on our participation in the worship of heaven along with angels and departed saints in God’s heavenly throne room (see Rev 4–5). In worship, God grants us a special audience with him in heaven through the power of the Holy Spirit on the basis of the work of Jesus our high priest, who has opened the way to God’s heavenly presence and who leads us in worship there (Heb 4:14–16; 7:23–8:7; 10:19–22). By forgiving our sins, God makes us fully ready to take our place in worship around his heavenly throne in order to hear his word, to offer ourselves afresh for his service, to pray for the world, and to celebrate the feast at his table. When we sing words like “Holy, holy, holy” and “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,” we are taking the songs of angels on our lips (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8) to join with them in worship before the throne of God above. (In ancient liturgies, a song about the worship of heaven always followed the *Sursum corda* dialogue. It was called the *Sanctus*, which is a Latin word that means “holy.” This Latin title comes from the opening words of the hymn, “Holy, holy, holy,” which were taken from the angelic song of praise in Isa 6:3 and echoed in Rev 4:8).